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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 LILONGWE 000389

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DEPT FOR AF/S - E. PELLETREAU, ALSO FOR INR - RITA BYRNES

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SUBJECT: MALAWI: RELIGION AND POLITICS A COMBUSTIBLE MIX IN 2009

REF: A. LILONGWE 280

1B. LILONGWE 366

Classified By: Political Officer John Letvin for Reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary: Malawi's population has been strongly influenced by Christian missionaries and Muslim slave traders for over one hundred years. Most Malawians define their identity primarily by region (northern, central or southern) and by religion. Unlike many other Africans, Malawians identify somewhat less strongly with their ethnic group. The most politically-influential religious organizations in Malawi remain the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), and the Catholic Church. While the CCAP remains split into synods with widely differing political views, the Catholic Church remains a relatively united national voice that comments on the political environment annually in a pastoral letter. MAM continues to be a strong advocate for the Muslim population, primarily concentrated in southeastern Malawi, but a recent decision by its leader, Sheikh Kanyamula, to support Cassim Chilumpha as the United Democratic Front's presidential candidate caused division in the organization and strained relations with former president Bakili Muluzi. Since churches and mosques are the only non-governmental organizations that reach nearly every village in Malawi, most religious leaders feel a duty to provide some form of civic education. Such efforts, however, have complicated the clergy's ability as mediators of political disputes, with every major religious organization accused of some bias by some stakeholder. Regardless of their differences, all major religious leaders are somewhat concerned that religion will continue to be politicized in the personal feud between current President Mutharika, a Catholic, and Muluzi, a Muslim. Such manipulation of faith could ultimately lead to violence in the run-up to, and aftermath of, next May's national elections.

#### Background

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12. (U) Malawi has a population estimated at over 13 million, of which approximately 80% are Christian and 13% are Muslim. Malawi's religious make-up was greatly affected by missionaries and the slave trade. Among missionary groups, the Free Church of Scotland, the Dutch Reformed Church (South Africa), and the Church of Scotland were the most important in the early development of Christianity in Malawi, establishing the Livingstonia, Nkhoma, and Blantyre Synods respectively. The three synods eventually united to form the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) and remain the largest Protestant denomination in Malawi. Islam, originally established among the Yao people along the southern lakeshore of Lake Malawi, arrived via slave traders from Zanzibar in the 1870s. Although still largely concentrated in southeastern Malawi, Muslims, nearly all adherents of Sunni

Islam, can now be found in all urban areas of Malawi. The White Fathers brought Catholicism to Malawi in 1889, and the Roman Catholic Church has since grown to be the largest single denomination in the country with over two million members. The Catholic bishops' March 1992 pastoral letter, which criticized the economic disparity and restriction of freedom in Malawi, is credited with starting the process that led to democracy in Malawi. While other religions and denominations exist in abundance in Malawi, the CCAP, Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), and the Roman Catholic Church remain the most influential in politics today.

#### Livingstonia Synod - A Major Influence in the North

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¶3. (SBU) The Northern Region of Malawi, home to the CCAP-Livingstonia Synod, contains approximately ten percent of Malawi's population. The Livingstonia Synod dates back to 1875, when it was founded by Dr. Robert Laws in honor of Dr. David Livingstone. The synod has a history of promoting education which over time has led to a more literate, educated population in the northern region of Malawi than in other parts of the country. This educational superiority led during the colonial period to what many other Malawians considered an overrepresentation of northerners in government and other desirable jobs, and subsequently to a backlash and discrimination. Northerners are predominantly Tambuka speakers, while 80 percent of Malawi speaks Chichewa, creating a second differentiating factor for the region.

¶4. (SBU) While the region's 33 seats in the 193-seat National Assembly are more than it should have based on its

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population, the region's perception that anti-Northerner sentiment will block anyone from the region from winning the presidency makes many still feel politically neglected. Heading into the 2009 presidential elections, the northern-based Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) party, which captured all 33 seats in the 1994 election, has dwindled to a lone parliamentarian in the National Assembly. AFORD's decline has left the region up for grabs, and sweeping this battleground region could potentially be the key to winning the presidency in 2009. Political rumors continue to swirl that President Mutharika could choose respected Minister of Finance Goodall Gondwe, a popular MP from Mzimba in northern Malawi, to be his running mate in 2009 in an attempt to cement Northern region support.

¶5. (C) Reverend Howard Nkoma, General Secretary of the CCAP-Livingstonia Synod, told emboff that he saw no reason why the church could not make statements on politics that were consistent with church beliefs. While adding that the synod should remain non-partisan, Nkoma also said he believed Malawi was founded on Christianity. Nkoma made it clear he had no love for former president Bakili Muluzi (a Muslim) or the United Democratic Front (UDF). He said it was wrong for the UDF to pursue implementation of the floor-crossing prohibition of Section 65 after Muluzi blatantly recruited opposition MPs to the UDF during his ten years in power.

¶6. (C) However, Nkoma did not give a free pass to Mutharika and the DPP either. At the front of the secretariat building, the Livingstonia Synod has a billboard that reads in Tambuka, "No to Quotas, No to Chichewa". The sign is in reference to recent initiatives -- backed by the GOM -- that a regional quota system used from 1989-1994 for university selection be reintroduced. The sign further protests the Malawi Special Law Commission's suggestion that the government update the Constitution to mandate Chichewa as the national language of Malawi. In general terms, Nkoma suggested that the Northern region was being oppressed by Malawi's larger central and southern regions, and that if Mutharika reinforced this oppression through measures such as quotas or language, he would lose the region no matter who

was his running mate.

¶ 7. (C) Rev. Maurice Munthali, Publicity Secretary for the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) - an influential interfaith civil society organization - and heir apparent to Nkhoma as head of the Livingstonia Synod, has been one of the most outspoken critics of Mutharika for violating the Constitution. Munthali commented to emboff that much like in the days of Kamuzu Banda, a country left to politicians alone is very dangerous and civil society must provide balance to politicians' desires. Munthali believed that while the North appeared to favor DPP now, in the end a wide range of independent and smaller party candidates endorsed by the Synod would take most seats in the region as they did in 2005.

¶ 8. (C) Moses Mkandawire, Director of the Synod's Church and Society program that provides civic education, has also been outspoken about Mutharika and the DPP. Mkandawire publicly blasted Mutharika in late April, saying politicians should not make the public suffer for their personal differences and condemned the non-listening attitude of Mutharika and the DPP. The comments drew fire from DPP secretary general Heatherwick Ntaba, who responded that the Livingstonia Synod was "spiritually bankrupt". Although Ntaba later apologized, in mid-May Mkandawire and Munthali both told emboff they were warned they were on a list of civil society leaders who could be arrested in conjunction with the alleged May coup attempt (ref A). (Comment: Neither have been arrested, but the events have harmed the relationship between DPP and the Livingstonia Synod.)

Nkhoma Synod - For the Central Region and the MCP

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¶ 9. (SBU) The Central region of Malawi has 40 percent of the country's population and is the stronghold of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the political vehicle of former dictator Kamuzu Banda. Banda's roots in the Central region, and his resulting favoritism towards its people, helped entrench the party even beyond Banda's rule, but the CCAP Nkhoma Synod has also played a part. The Nkhoma Synod, founded by missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa in 1889, joined the Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods in 1926 to form the CCAP. Due to its strong ties with South Africa, the Synod benefited from the MCP government's recognition of apartheid South Africa. While 89% of the

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Northern region and 85% of the Southern region voted for a multi-party system in Malawi's historic 1993 referendum on democracy, only 32% of those in the Central region supported the shift away from MCP's one-party rule.

¶ 10. (C) Pastor Canaan Phiri, head of the Malawi Council of Churches, told emboff that the Nkhoma Synod is still 100% behind the MCP. Chris Chisoni National Coordinator of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) hypothesized that Nkhoma Synod still remembers the relationship it had with MCP presidential candidate John Tembo when Tembo was the right hand of Kamuzu Banda, and there was little chance of anyone moving the Synod -- and by default, the region -- away from the MCP.

Muslim Association of Malawi - Divided in the East

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¶ 11. (C) While Malawi's core Muslim areas were staunchly UDF in the 1994-2004 elections, new leadership at the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) has sought to disassociate the organization from politics in general and the UDF in particular. Sensitive to past claims that if you were not a UDF supporter you were not Muslim, Sheikh Yusuf Kanyamula, chairman of MAM, said the organization would prefer to see Muslims act as a balance of power between Christian groups. He said the group's primary interest was to stop people from

allowing democracy to backslide, citing corruption and disrespect of the constitution as the two main problems in Malawi government. The views have made Kanyamula a critic (and target) of both Mutharika and Muluzi. Kanyamula's hope is that a new generation of Muslim leaders will arise to take the reigns from Muluzi, who Kanyamula believes has already had his turn. Kanyamula was recently a strong supporter of Cassim Chilumpha, the current vice-president and another Muslim, in his bid to unseat Muluzi as the UDF candidate, but told emboff he feared violence if he attended the April UDF convention. (Comment: With Muluzi's selection as the UDF candidate in April, it is now unclear what influence Kanyamula and MAM can have with the UDF.)

¶12. (C) Sheikh Imran Mohammed, a prominent theology lecturer at University of Malawi and member of the PAC board, concurred with Kanyamula's assessment that politics is becoming a divisive issue for Muslims. Mohammed told emboff that religious tension is being created by politics where little previously existed. Mohammed commented that in this environment, little disagreements, such as last year's decision to begin teaching a Christian-based Bible Knowledge class in primary school, could be magnified. Both Mohammed and Kanyamula believed the further use of Christian-Muslim divisions for political gain could foment violence in hotly contested districts such as Machinga, Balaka, and Liwonde in the next elections.

#### Catholics - National Reach

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¶13. (C) Based on their ground-breaking 1992 pastoral letter, which criticized the one-party state for a growing gap between rich and poor and noted serious restriction of freedoms including censorship, the Catholic Church has been seen as a leader in the political formation of a democratic Malawi. More cohesive than the CCAP, the Catholic Church continues to use its national reach and its widely-read annual pastoral letter to comment on the current political situation. This year's letter entitled "Taking Responsibility for Our Future" focused on the democratic climate in Malawi and the May 2009 elections. Some opposition politicians expressed discontent with this year's letter, claiming it lacked the fire of previous documents from the Banda and Muluzi years. They believed that Mutharika's Catholic roots were muting the Church's criticism.

¶14. (SBU) In the letter, the bishops condemned the lack of intra-party democracy, pointing out that dictatorships at the party level lead to dictatorial tendencies once in government. The letter pleaded for the executive and legislative branches to put an end to the overuse of the judiciary to solve political disagreements. Notably, the bishops admonished the opposition, saying if it exists only to oppose the government in an attempt to appease its leaders then Malawi will suffer. On the other hand, the letter also called on the government to respect the rule of law and seek compromises. Regarding the 2009 elections, the bishops expressed the need for an independent electoral commission, impartial observers, and peaceful campaigning. The letter's

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boldest admonishments regarded the practice of buying votes through handouts, the media's use of inflammatory language to breed hatred, and political leaders who are unwilling to work together.

¶15. (C) In conversations with Bishop Ste-Marie of the Lilongwe diocese and Bishop Zuza of the Mzuzu diocese, both commented to emboff that the Catholic Church tries to stay non-partisan and that the church's criticisms in the pastoral letter applied to all political leaders. Zuza admitted it was difficult for the Catholic Church to get away from the public perception that the Church supported Bingu, however. Zuza also said that although Archbishop Ziyaye was leading the clergy's current mediation efforts, he did not believe

political leaders were really listening (ref B).

¶16. (C) Chris Chisoni of CCJP became a target of the UDF recently after a draft document from the organization with his name was leaked to the press. The document stated the case for why CCJP, which plays an advisory role to the bishops, should oppose Muluzi bid to run for a third term. Although the document focused only on the constitutional nature of Muluzi's bid, Chisoni said the UDF quickly tried to politicize the religious source of the document and make it the position of the entire Catholic Church. Chisoni said although the Church strives to maintain neutrality, it was impossible to regulate the political beliefs of all priests and individuals in the church. Chisoni further echoed the sentiments of Malawi Council of Churches Chair Rev. Phiri and PAC Publicity Secretary Rev. Munthali on the difficulties that religious organizations in Malawi are facing, being asked to serve the dual role of advocates for democracy and mediators of political disputes which has left no party appearing to be impartial.

#### The Politics of the Christian-Muslim Divide

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¶17. (C) Comment: Religion, more than tribalism, reinforces regionalism in Malawi. Whether Protestant, Catholic, or Muslim, in the North, Central, or Southern region, all religious leaders expressed fears that politicians seeking to mobilize support or take retribution for perceived slights would continue to politicize religion. This politicization will be most alarming in the Southern region, where both Muluzi and Mutharika have their power bases. Many church leaders said there was at least a "medium risk" for violence in the South based on religion. Bishop Ste-Remi recounted how the Bishop of Mangochi had previously had his home surrounded by Muslims for a perceived bias against the UDF; Bishop Zuza told stories of mosques being burned near tobacco farms in the North during the 1999 elections when religion was less of a factor in the political dynamic than today. All religious leaders stressed that their organizations would be reaching out to their congregations through civic and voter education programs that advocate for peaceful elections, yet in past elections, observers said even MAM, CCAP, and CCJP civic education programs have been tinged with bias. With religion an obvious differentiating factor between Muluzi and Mutharika, it remains the spark most likely to ignite violence in Malawi during elections next May.

¶18. (C) Despite the comments of Munthali, Chisoni, and Phiri regarding the difficulty of being advocates for democracy and mediators of disputes, it should be noted that during the current political impasse, church leaders have now been turned to on two occasions to find a way forward. In the current mediation sessions, a five-person team uniting the Catholic Archbishop of Malawi, a leader of the CCAP, Sheikh Kanyamula from MAM, as well as leaders from the Malawi Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Malawi, have met with all political leaders. Both the government and opposition sides still view this broad-based interfaith team as the most trustworthy and neutral mediators in Malawi. While the mediation team may not succeed in reaching a compromise solution, it will not be because of a lack of legitimacy as the mediators prove that religious leaders from different faiths can still work together toward a more democratic Malawi.

EASTHAM